

Food assistance for malnourished children in rural West Java

In Indonesia, approximately 13 million children suffer from malnutrition. In some districts, almost 50 per cent of infants and young children are underweight. For children and infants, the long-term impact of malnutrition can be devastating, affecting their health, educational and career prospects throughout their lives.

In the village of Sukasari, West Java, the National Program for Community Empowerment, or PNPM Generasi, works with the community health system to encourage sound nutrition. PNPM also works to promote other healthy practices, such as immunisation and sanitation.

In Sukasari, health workers encourage mothers of young infants to attend monthly meetings where they can weigh and measure their babies. At these meetings, the midwife and health workers identify malnourished children. If children weigh and measure significantly less than they should at their age, health workers provide their care givers with supplemental food, including milk and vitamin and protein enriched sausages.

Midwives also encourage mothers to breastfeed infants and to provide young children with nutritious, locally available foods. Many families receiving this assistance are amongst the poorest in the village, including widows, single parents, and people with disabilities.

One recipient of PNPM Generasi's supplemental food program was Asep Adrian, who recently turned three. Asep's mother died giving birth to him at home. His birth was unattended by a health worker and in unsanitary surroundings. Left an orphan, Asep is cared for by his grandmother, Ibu Omah, who lives with her disabled husband in a bamboo shack at the edge of the village.

"Asep's mother died because there wasn't a qualified health worker to care for her," Ibu Omah says. "She was attended by a traditional birth attendant only. That was before PNPM Generasi was established in the village.

At one of the mother-and-infant sessions, the midwife noted that Asep was underweight for his age. Ibu Omah says: "As a bamboo craft worker, my husband earns about Rp 20 000 per day (around \$2 dollars). We spend most of our income on rice, oil, vegetables and kerosene. The midwife said that Asep needed more protein. She provided me with a supply of milk, vitamin supplements and food for my grandchild. The PNPM Generasi program will provide him with supplementary food assistance for three months. He has already put on weight, but the midwife says he should stay in the program."

According to Dita Mustikawati, the village facilitator for the PNPM Generasi program in Sukasari, the health and nutritional status of children is a matter of paramount importance. The mother-and-infant sessions also address a number of other issues. “We make sure caregivers register the births of children and receive birth certificates. If parents fail to do that, it can make registering for primary school much harder later. We also make information about play groups and educational facilities available. Our goal is not just to ensure the health of babies and infants. We want them to grow up to become productive and well educated. We want children to be able to make an ongoing contribution to the development of their community,” she says.

Australia has committed up to \$125 million over five years to support the scale up of the PNPM Generasi program to some of Indonesia’s poorest communities. This program works to improve the nutritional status of pregnant women, babies and infants under five. PNPM Generasi is operating in more than 2000 villages across Indonesia, benefiting more than three million poor Indonesians.